



A suggested line-up of the hardware necessary for the most basic of teledildonic experiences

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As VR continues its steady rise through all avenues of society, it was only a matter of time before sex became part of the virtual agenda. Adam Phillips reports

CYBERSEX

Sex has been with us since the beginning. Celebrated, repressed, enjoyed, frowned upon, analysed, suppressed and loved – the subject matter has always had a wide ranging effect on all people throughout the ages.

With each new medium created in society, the sexual act has always found a platform to help express itself – the printing press introduced erotic literature to the masses, photography gave birth to erotic pictures, film moved these images and now, with the coming of the computer age and more specifically, virtual reality, the normally hands-off, voyeuristic experience is going interactive with full blown 32-bit colour, photo-realistic graphics, digital sound... and teledildonics.

Over the last few years, the availability of sex-related material for computers has increased in leaps and bounds all over the world. Explicit images and video footage can be pulled off bulletin boards at the touch of a button now, causing an upheaval of moral panic in Britain.

Erototronics

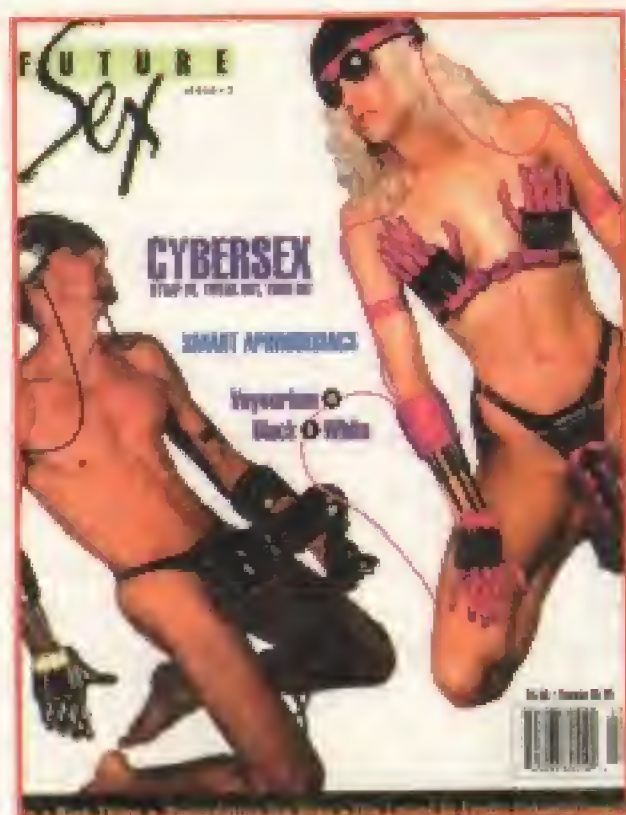
With new technology beginning to enable the user to involve their bodies as well as their minds, the scoffing hilarity of making love to a computer is becoming a reality.

Teledildonics, erototronics, cybersex, or whatever name you want to give it, is simply a means whereby the user can involve themselves fully in an computerised, interactive world and, ideally, act out any sexual fantasy they wish.

The main components required to produce the experience are a head-mounted display unit for the visuals and a full-sensory body data suit.

With Aids and other sex-related diseases scaring people away from promiscuity, cybersex is seen as the ultimate in safe sex.

Others see the benefits as more than that – people with disabilities who have little opportunity of sexual contact, could enjoy some semblance of a normal sex life. Teledildonics could also be used in sex therapy to aid patients to overcome their fears



Cybersex - the downfall of the most intimate of human communications or a genuinely useful and important technological development? Time will tell

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and psychoses towards the sexual act.

American magazine Future Sex believes like many others that teledildonics will eventually end up as a full blown reality and better than the real thing.

Indeed, the virtual reality industry is taking teledildonics seriously – Sadie Plant, a cyberfeminist, wrote a report on teledildonics for a VR conference held at Warwick University. In an interview with Loaded Magazine, she says: "The wonderful thing about cybersex is that everybody who has been marginalised or oppressed will have the chance to realise their desires."

"I think women will become far more confident once they've been able to experiment in cyberspace and, as a consequence, they'll be far more demanding of real life sexual partners. Mr 15-pints-a-night doesn't stand a chance." With all this conceptual discussion, the only thing holding humankind back from disappearing from reality all together is the technology.

While graphic capabilities are advancing at lightning speed, the suit is a harder problem to resolve altogether – the basic principle is to

use tiny sensors to let off heat and vibrations and air bladders that apply pressure to the skin as a form of tactile response.

The pictures shown here are of a basic kit that cover the main erogenous zones of both female and male. Although these are merely speculative works produced on a computer, this kind of equipment is well on the way to completion. Meanwhile back on earth, one has to wonder where all this will lead. Future Sex predicts that over the next 200 years, the system will develop into either a multi-user or a solo environment with a seamless physical interface and full visual and audio capabilities.

They believe that way off in the future, these systems will be surgically implanted to include brain-enhancing chemicals and ultimately, the virtual experience will be better than the real thing.

Isolated

All this excitement and debate just leaves one burning question – is this really going to improve people's lives or simply isolate people from each other even more?

According to Mike Saenz, publisher of the infamous erotic software package Virtual Valerie for the Apple Mac, we want to become more cut off from each other.

In Future Sex, he says: "People want to remove excess human contact. Especially as the planet becomes overpopulated. They want that distance, and I think that VR sex could actually give them that."

Hearing a statement like that may sound depressing but with the one-on-one relationship between solo participant and technology becoming more and more popular, it may well be a valid, if sad, point of view.

What we do know for certain is that if you think the press and public outcry concerning sex issues is loud now, wait till cybersex blooms into a full blown industry, then the talking will turn to shouting and, as usual, the enticement of ever more exciting technology will probably win the day.

● We would like to hear your opinions on the issues raised in this feature. Send any thoughts and comments to the usual address for the attention of Adam Phillips

● Special thanks to Future Sex, a magazine specialising in all things cyber and erotic, and Reactor Inc, creators of the best selling Virtual Valerie and Donna Matrix titles, for the use of their concept pictures



A mock-up of the graphics that would be displayed in the head-mounted display unit

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